

INSIDE HAMAS

The Untold Story of
Militants, Martyrs and Spies



'the most comprehensive account yet...
highly readable.' JON SNOW

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Preface

Tense with anticipation after clearing my luggage with the Jordanian customs, I braced myself for the border crossing ahead. On that sunny May morning in 1998, as I approached Israel for the first time, I was preparing for the inevitable grilling in light of my Palestinian heritage. I boarded one of the ageing buses which ferry passengers at regular intervals between the Jordanian side of the border and the Israeli checkpoint. Glancing around at my fellow passengers as we travelled across no man's land – the narrow King Hussein Bridge separating Jordan from the Israeli border – I noted that the majority of my fellow travellers were Palestinians like me.

Young Israeli soldiers supervised by Israeli intelligence took turns asking the purpose of my journey. As the interrogation wore on, it sunk in that, despite the fact that I was standing in the land of my forefathers, it was I who was the stranger. As I was body-searched, the questions continued. Whom was I going to see? Was I carrying any weapons? Where was I born? I was born in Tyre, just a few miles from Israel's border with south Lebanon. They appeared suspicious of my answers and asked me to wait in the interrogation room while they excused themselves to a side room to confer. Nothing in their attitude reflected the triumph of the signed Oslo Peace Accords, negotiated over a five-year period and which seemed to herald the end of decades of bloodshed, hatred and wars. I was finally given

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permission to enter Israel, not because of my Palestinian background, but thanks to my British passport.

As I emerged on the Israeli side of the border, my first thought was to wonder what ancient secrets the craggy hillsides must hold about this beautiful but troubled land. Driving towards Jerusalem, the often repeated stories of my parents and grandparents as they described their homeland unfolded in front of my eyes. I no longer felt a stranger as the scenery, until now just a mental picture, rolled past the windows. But beyond the fields of my parents' memory were the Jewish settlements. Row upon row of white houses with red rooftops spread along the hilltops like mushrooms, a man-made blot on the natural landscape.

It was with a sense of unreality that I finally arrived in Jerusalem. I had chosen to stay at the American Colony Hotel because it was in East Jerusalem, the Palestinian side of the city. My colleagues had recommended this well-known refuge for foreign correspondents so that I would not feel out of place in the Holy City. I immediately set out to experience Jerusalem with Mohammed Salhab, an old friend who lives within the ancient city walls. He owns an antique shop not far from Al Aqsa mosque, which was top of my list of sites to visit. The third holiest shrine for Muslims worldwide, its modest silver-black dome is almost eclipsed by the golden dome of the Mosque of Omar that dominates the panoramic view of old Jerusalem.

We were soon walking through the narrow alleys lined with tiny shops crammed with spices, brass antiques, silverware and wooden souvenirs. Palestinians dressed in their traditional *galabieh* robes with black-and-white chequered *kofieh*s jostled with guidebook-carrying tourists and Orthodox Jews wearing their distinctive black hats and floor-sweeping coats. A sense of *déjà vu* again washed over me, as these scenes were reminiscent of those described to me so many years ago as a child in Lebanon.

It was Friday, the Muslim holiday, and thousands of Palestinians, young and old, men and woman, had challenged the Israeli measures restricting them from praying at Al Aqsa. As we moved slowly through the crowded alleyways, Mohammed surprised me by picking up every clean newspaper or piece of cardboard he spotted

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on the ground. As we approached the gate which opened into the mosque's courtyard, I was taken aback by the scale of the Israeli military presence: soldiers and police were checking every person who entered. It was then that I learned the purpose of the papers Mohammed had been conscientiously gathering. He spread them on the ground of the courtyard as makeshift prayer mats. Thousands of us would be praying outdoors as every inch of the Mosque's prayer hall was already covered with kneeling worshippers. I thought of my mother and father, whose dream it has always been to pray in the very place I was sitting. So strong is this longing that on the wall of our home back in Burj El Shamali camp in Lebanon there is a three-dimensional model of the Al Aqsa mosque complex and its iconic golden dome. They have not been allowed to visit the country since they fled in 1948. Mohammed, who is married to an English lady and is not very observant in his practice of Islam, explained to me the profound feeling he and many Palestinians like him experience, which brings them here each Friday. It is their way of expressing, at least once a week, that Jerusalem is theirs too and the Israelis cannot ignore them.

My first visit to the Holy Land was to last one month. It was not just a personal pilgrimage; I had been following the Palestinian cause and its leaders around the world for decades. With the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, these leaders had come home and were trying to build their state. For five years, after he had returned from exile in Tunis, the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat encouraged me to visit him at his headquarters in Ramallah and Gaza. Similarly, during telephone interviews I conducted with them from London, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, Hamas' spiritual leader and Dr Abdul Aziz Al Rantisi, a Hamas firebrand and leader, would urge me to come to Gaza. I also wanted to see Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president who was at that time heading the Palestinian negotiating team with Israel. Abbas did his best to convince me to visit my parents' home town in the Galilee, but this was one journey I was not ready to make. I could not go there before a just peace had been achieved.

Shortly after my arrival in Jerusalem, Arafat invited me for lunch in his Ramallah headquarters, housed in the former British mandate